

PREPARING NOW FOR COMMON CORE:

A STATE AND
LOCAL VIEW



BY STEPHEN DeWITT

Forty-four states, the District of Columbia and U.S. Virgin Islands have formally adopted the Common Core State Standards (Common Core), and implementation is scheduled to begin in 2014—not that far away when you think about all that needs to be put in place. It's important for local

educators and administrators to actively engage in the Common Core discussion to ensure that career and technical education (CTE) is included as states and school districts work on plans. Some states and school districts have involved CTE early as active participants in planning, but others have not yet focused on how CTE will be incorporated. Whether you agree with the development of the standards or not, Common Core offers unique opportunities for CTE, and it is important to identify how to leverage this work to the benefit of students.

The National Governors Association (NGA) and Council of Chief State School

Officers (CCSSO)—the two national organizations that coordinated the state-led Common Core effort—have expressed interest that the standards include CTE. And, although the Common Core is a state-led effort, Education Secretary Arne Duncan indicates the standards and assessments that are being developed by two federally funded assessment consortia will be relevant to CTE. Here is what Secretary Duncan said during a speech to CTE advocates in February 2011: “I am pleased to say that the Common Core standards developed by the states deliberately incorporate what is often thought of as career-ready skills, such as problem-solving and communication skills. The next generation of assessments currently being developed by the states under the Race to the Top assessment competition will also assess these higher-order skills.”

A Look at Colorado

What are the actions that states are undertaking to incorporate CTE? Katy Blatnick-Gagne, program director with the Family and Consumer Sciences office within the Colorado State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education (SBCCOE), offers a good example. (The SBCCOE administers CTE in the state of Colorado.) Colorado CTE has been updating, creating and aligning the state’s CTE standards over the past three years through use of career clusters. Many states have been following this model, but Colorado’s work was also driven, in part, by legislation in the state.

“Colorado’s Achievement Plan for Kids,” or CAP4K, passed in May 2008, was a landmark education reform initiative that created for the first time in Colorado a truly aligned preschool-to-postsecondary educational system,” according to Blatnick-Gagne. The law includes a provision that instructs the state board to take into account CTE standards adopted by the SBCCOE, and to align the appropriate portions of the preschool through elementary and secondary education

standards with the CTE standards.

This past spring, the CTE division within CCCS completed alignments to the Common Core for math, reading, writing and communication areas, and they were adopted by the full Colorado Department of Education. Blatnick-Gagne says that all program directors involved led content teams (comprised of high school and postsecondary teachers) to work on the standards project. Each team proposed the content standards for alignment and review.

The academic alignment validation was held in conjunction with subject matter experts in the Common Core math, reading, writing and communication areas, along with Colorado standards for seven other content areas. Currently, Colorado CTE has one set of Essential Skills standards to drive Postsecondary and Workforce Readiness (PWR) inclusion in all CTE programs, 52 pathways with validated academic alignments, and 12 pathways with revised standards ready for alignment (currently there are no approved programs in these areas).

“For the first time legislators, school districts and the Colorado Department of Education are looking to Colorado CTE education programs to add ‘spice’ to a student’s educational path,” says Blatnick-Gagne. With CAP4K, along with many other pieces of specific legislation, such as the bill that requires all students to have an Individual Career and Academic Plan, CTE has emerged as a leader in 21st century education in Colorado. Colorado’s CTE programs have evolved beyond the historic perception of vocational education. Blatnick-Gagne boasts, “Our programs provide relevant and rigorous learning, the ability to raise achievement among all students, and strengthening of Colorado’s workforce and economy.”

CTE standards’ alignment to the Common Core and Colorado Department of Education content areas speak volumes, but there is still a lot of work that needs to be done. The CTE pro-

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gram director team will be hosting eight regional meetings across the state this fall for secondary teachers to learn more about how to use these new standards in their classrooms on a daily basis. Colorado is currently working on a Web-based delivery system that will allow teachers to plot their courses and automatically align CTE and academic standards to their lessons. Blatnick-Gagne’s advice to other CTE practitioners: “Don’t let your story go untold, and work with legislators and those who are making the decisions about standards and assessments.”

One School Tackles Common Core

ACTE has been advertising for examples of CTE Common Core work; local examples have been more difficult to find. However, some good work does exist. Tina Thomas, supervisor of instruction for CTE and social studies at Queen Anne’s County High School in Centreville, Maryland, says her school began thinking about how to connect to the Common Core when the standards were released in draft form. The school initiated a gap analysis to determine what was already in place and where more work was needed. She said the standards require a new way of thinking. For instance, everyone in her school

is familiar with a common language used in education, but the use of “indicator,” “objective” and various other terms have slightly different meanings in Common Core. She also noted that the terms used in the English language arts/literacy standards are different from those used by the math standards—a confusing issue for those who are interpreting and implementing the standards.

Thomas noted that while her school is eager to put in place what is needed to meet the standards, she does not feel like they need to “lead the race.” In fact, the CTE Common Core work in her school is very dependent upon what others in the core academic courses are doing.

“We are going to have to wait to see what comes out of the English and math courses first, then see how CTE fits in,” said Tina.

She also noted that the Common Core work has helped to de-silo CTE. “Our CTE teachers are excited to be included in this work,” said Tina. “They are happy that they are involved in the same activities that the core academic teachers are involved in.”

The school has also had a lot of support from the state of Maryland. Thomas believes the state has done a pretty good job of communicating Common Core information. For one thing, the state assistant superintendent for CTE came to a meeting where the issues were being discussed by the school. She adds, however, that her school’s work on Common Core may have been easier to coordinate between the CTE and other core academic departments given the small size of the school, and the fact that she is also the school’s social studies coordinator; this provided a natural link between the

CTE and academic courses.

ACTE is working to support CTE’s role in Common Core. We have established a Common Core Web page on the ACTE Web site (www.acteonline.org/commoncore.aspx). Our Annual Convention and Career Tech Expo in St. Louis next month will feature Common Core sessions. In addition, ACTE continues to be involved in discussions with NGA, CCSSO and the two state consortia that are developing assessments linked to the standards. ■

Stephen DeWitt

is senior director of public policy at ACTE. He can be contacted at sdewitt@acteonline.org.

Katy Blatnick-Gagné, FACS program director at the Colorado Community College System, Denver, contributed to this story. She can be contacted at katy.blatnick-gagne@cccs.edu.

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